

The Town Bridge and John Constable



The Town Bridge was known in earlier times as Barnaby's Bridge. It was rebuilt around 1800 as a 'County Bridge,' on the authority of the Dorset county justices. A plaque on the north side of the bridge, and facing upstream, carries the inscription 'County Bridge, 1800.'

The blue plaque on the Town Bridge records the visit of the artist John Constable to Gillingham in 1823. This was not the first of Constable's visits to Gillingham, but the visit is memorable for his painting 'The Bridge at Gillingham', which shows the Town Bridge and some of the buildings visible beyond it.

This painting was made on the south side of the Bridge, looking across towards the church and vicarage. It shows, partly hidden amongst the trees, a portion of the old vicarage where Constable stayed with John Fisher, Gillingham's vicar, and which was demolished in 1883, and also the rear of the property in Queen Street known as The Barton. The bridge parapets are of course still there, as was the vicarage wall until not that many years ago.



The bonneted girls on the bridge are believed to be workers from the silk mill which formerly stood on land to the left of the old town mill. There is a reference in one of John Fisher's subsequent letters to Constable in London which suggests that one of the girls

from the mill was in the habit of peeping over his shoulder whilst he was carrying out his work.

The gates in the vicarage wall most probably led on to a drive or a carriageway, and the building to the right of the gates was a coach house.

Constable spent many hours sitting out in the open air to complete this work, for which he was rewarded with an attack toothache and facial neuralgia.